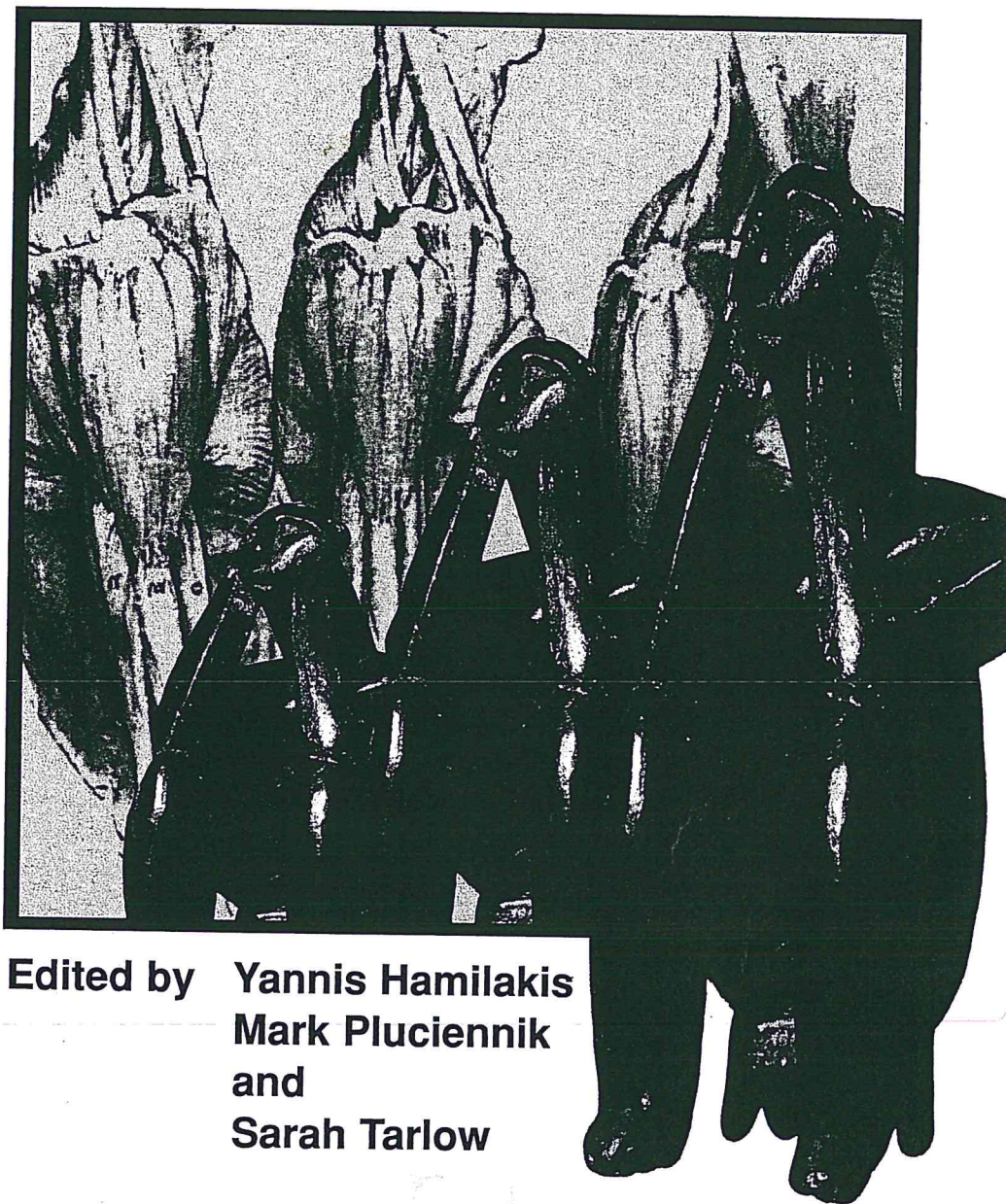


Thinking through the Body

Archaeologies of Corporeality



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and
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FEELING THROUGH THE BODY

Gesture in Cretan Bronze Age Religion

Christine Morris and Alan Peatfield

INTRODUCTION

The origins of this paper lay in an archaeological problem: the understanding of the variety of gestures of clay figurines we had excavated from a mountain peak sanctuary of the Cretan Bronze Age. As we discuss in greater detail below, such figurines from other peak sanctuaries, portraying the worshippers at the sanctuary, have been usually interpreted as representing gestures of worship, adoration, and supplication. While understandable within the conventions of applying familiar western religious norms to the reading of ancient religion, such an interpretation seemed to undervalue the essential *physicality* of the figurine gestures. Moreover the sanctuary findspot placed the physicality of the gestures firmly within the context of ritual *action*, the understanding of which has benefitted enormously from contemporary anthropological and archaeological interest in the body.

Archaeological thinking through the body, however, often falls victim to the Cartesian mind/body duality it purports to resolve. Bodies are perceived as texts to be read, or as little more than mutable mental constructs. The Cartesian, and ultimately, Augustinian and Platonic, subjection of body to mind, is simply replayed in post-modern style.

By contrast, in this paper we have chosen to feel through the body, by addressing the fundamental physicality of gesture, as a conduit, not to ritual action, but to religious *experience*. In the context of an 'embodied archaeology' our interests lie less in the body as a site/text to be classified, read or deconstructed, and more in the 'feeling body' as a driving force in ritual behaviour and experience (Asad 1997, Stoller 1997)

RITUAL ACTION IN MINOAN CRETE

The first major work written on the Bronze Age civilization of Crete, Sir Arthur Evans' *The Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult and its Mediterranean relations* (1901) set the scene for what has been a consistent thematic focus in Aegean Bronze Age archaeology, the study of Minoan religion. Evans' seminal analysis, further elaborated in his extensive synthesis of Minoan civilization, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos*, also established the parameters of the primary evidence, the rich and diverse iconography of Minoan art: wall-paintings, seals and sealings, terracotta sculpture (Evans 1921–36; hereafter *PM* I–IV). While deities, belief systems, socio-religious interaction have all received due attention, the aspect of Minoan religion that has most consistently interested scholars has been: ritual.

In the past twenty years two key concepts have emerged as the fundamental starting points for the analysis of Minoan ritual. First, there is the notion that what we see in art is to some degree a record, albeit idealized and symbolized, of enacted events such as processions, sacrifices, libations, offerings, music and dance, i.e. what was really done (Cameron 1978, 1987, Hägg 1985). Secondly, Warren has articulated the notion of ritual action (Warren 1988). Borrowing from the vocabulary of the later Greek mystery cults, especially Eleusis, he defined three elements of ritual action as things said or sung (*legomena*) things done (*dromena*), and things displayed (*deiknumena*), adding a fourth element, things envisioned in epiphany. This creates a structure by which ritual action becomes the driving force of Minoan religion, rather than the incidence of intellectually defined belief. The raw material of Minoan ritual action is, fortunately for scholarship, presented in at times sophisticated, interactive, almost narrative scenes. Thus as well as recognizing obvious rituals of sacrifice and libation, we can also go some way towards interpreting a few purposes of ritual, such as epiphany (Hägg 1986, Niemeier 1989), rites of passage (Marinatos 1984:61–84, Peatfield 1995); healing (Myres 1902–3, Peatfield 1990).

The perception of ritual action as fundamental to Minoan religion is therefore established and accepted. Action can, however, take on at least two dimensions of meaning: the external and the internal. By 'external' we mean that an action is purely symbolic, done for the sake of form and tradition, to express ideas that are only ever intellectually defined. In a sense, it is action as play-acting. Even the most superficial actor is aware, however, of the powerful emotional force of drama, that what you do affects how you feel and what you experience (Turner 1982, 1991, Horton 1994). This is what we mean by the 'internal' or expressive dimension of action: that physical or

embodied action can be used to affect emotional and psychological states, and to access altered states of consciousness, which transcend mundane everyday realities. In other words: body, mind, and spirit create a holistic interaction which can be a conduit to mystical experience.

Amid all the scholarly commentary on Minoan religion we do find references to altered states, conventionally expressed as 'ecstatic worship', and in which the underlying model seems to be that of Dionysiac frenzied or 'orgiastic' possession (*PM* III: 68, Nilsson 1950:506, Warren 1981, 1988). Nevertheless the 'how', 'why', and broader implications of ecstasy as an element of Minoan religion have not received detailed analysis. Perhaps this is because ecstatic states, mysticism, and altered consciousness tend to be regarded as superstition, and thus inferior to the rational, intellectual framework that defines the western academic tradition in which modern scholarship resides (Tambiah 1990). Similarly the western mind has been taught to prize the objectivity of rational thought, and to be suspicious of the subjectivity of the bodily experience, although the notions of a disembodied objectivism and of mind-body dualism have been seriously undermined by the 'embodiment' movement (Rorty 1979, Johnson 1987).

Minoan peak sanctuaries in context

We have become aware of the tension between 'external' and 'internal' perceptions of action through our study of the ritual gestures displayed by Minoan votive clay figurines. Our research arises specifically from our excavation of a Minoan mountain peak sanctuary at Atsipadhes Korakias in west central Crete. At least twenty-five mountain peak sanctuaries have been identified over the island, and they share consistent features of topography and votive material. Topographically, peak sanctuaries are set on prominent but accessible mountain peaks, close to upland areas of agricultural and pastoral exploitation. They also have strong visual links with the settlement areas from which their worshippers came, and with other peak sanctuaries (Rutkowski 1986, Peatfield 1983, 1990, 1994). The common votives from peak sanctuaries are clay figurines: human, animal, and votive limbs (modelled parts of the human anatomy, offered as prayers and thanks for healing) (Myres 1902-3, Rutkowski 1986, Peatfield 1990). The human figurines are not deity figures or idols, as Myres also presciently recognised, but represent the worshippers themselves, somehow memorializing their participation in the peak sanctuary ritual. It was this intimacy between worshipper, votive figurine, and implied ritual, that gave such weight to the meaning of the gestures, as we discuss below.

The chronology of the peak sanctuaries broadly coincides with the palatial period of Minoan civilization (c.2000-1450 BC), when Crete was ruled by

centralized palace states, among which Knossos seems to have become pre-eminent. At the beginning of this period (the First Palace period, c.2000–1700 BC) peak sanctuaries seem to embody a rural nature cult arising out of the concerns of the peasantry – fertility of the earth and flocks, the health and continuity of their human communities – a sacred dimension to living in a mountainous marginal landscape. By the end of the period (the Second Palace period, c.1700–1450 BC) the cult seems to have been appropriated by the palace elite. They reduced the number of active peak sanctuaries to those associated with regional control centres (palaces and towns), and used its natural imagery to justify the hierarchical dominance of the urban over the rural (Peatfield 1987, 1990, 1994).

Atsipadhes Korakias

When we came to excavate Atsipadhes Korakias in 1989 we already had a number of strong general interpretations to hand. Indeed the project was designed specifically to test some of them. Nevertheless the main aspect missing from all previous study of peak sanctuaries was the functioning of any sanctuary, embodied in the complete details of its spatial layout. Our dig strategy therefore, was the fine plotting of all the finds, in relation to one another, and to the natural features of the site topography (for a preliminary report on the excavation, see Peatfield 1992, see also Morris 1993, Morris and Peatfield 1996).

In summary, the Atsipadhes sanctuary was laid out on the two natural terraces of the Korakias peak: Upper to the west, Lower to the east. The Upper terrace seems to have been the main liturgical part of the sanctuary. Finds here were restricted to the eastern edge overlooking the Lower terrace. In this area of the Upper terrace, on the main east-west axis of the site, was found a small feature, an area empty of all finds, whose lowest levels had been hollowed into the natural soil. Around the feature was an exceptional density of figurine fragments, potsherds, and, unique to this part of the site, small rounded pebbles. It is likely that something once stood in this feature, probably as a focus of ritual activity.

The chronology of the Atsipadhes sanctuary was also clear. The main period of peak sanctuary use was the First Palace period, demonstrating that Atsipadhes was one of the rural peak sanctuaries that had gone out of use as the cult was centralized by the Second Palace period elite. More curiously, the site also had a lot of Neolithic pottery, the implications of which for Atsipadhes, the evolution of the peak sanctuary cult, and for Cretan Neolithic religion are still being studied (Morris and Batten, *in press*).

The characteristic finds from all peak sanctuaries include clay figurines of animals, humans, and models of human limbs. We soon started to wonder if the clay figurines (both anthropomorphic and animal) exhibited any kind of spatially distinctive distribution. Gender and gesture, although themselves not unproblematic categories, and their spatial distribution over the site, presented promising starting points for such a study. We focus here on the anthropomorphic figurines, and our comments here are work in progress. Full statistical data on the figurines will be presented in the final excavation report. It should be noted that the large corpus of peak sanctuary terracottas have received little in the way of systematic study (largely because most of them remain unpublished), in contrast to the interest in the smaller number of Minoan bronze figurines (Verlinden 1984, Hitchcock 1993, Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1995). Furthermore, discussions of Aegean Bronze Age figurines have tended not to be informed by the wider body of sophisticated writings on figurines (see Tringham and Conkey 1998 with references).

Related to the human figurines are, of course, the votive limbs. These have been recognized - from their first discovery - as offerings, prayers or thanks, for healing, on the model of Greco-Roman anatomical models offered in temples of the healer god, Asklepios, or the modern Greek *tamata*, gold and silver plaques hung beside icons in Greek Orthodox chapels (Myres 1902-3, Peatfield 1990). Despite this recognition, little attention has been paid to the *mechanisms* of healing within peak sanctuary cult; the act of votive offering does not in itself reveal the full story of the varied processes through which healing may be achieved. The significance of this is highlighted in the fact that, while votive limbs are common to the find assemblages of all excavated peak sanctuaries, very few peak sanctuaries have the large number and variety of votive limbs found at Petsophas, the first excavated and best known peak sanctuary. This was especially problematic at Atsipadhes, because since the re-identification of the so-called 'phalli' as the braceleted arms of human figurines in the open gestures we discuss below, there are only three definite votive limbs among our 5000 figurine fragments (Peatfield 1992).

Although the figurines, in fragments, are numbered in thousands (from Atsipadhes and other peak sanctuaries), they nevertheless adopt a restricted range of gestures. The figurines are normally portrayed standing, and the variation in gesture, or more properly speaking 'body posture', lies primarily in the position of the arms and hands relative to the head and body. The commonest and best known is the 'hands to torso' posture, of which there are two main variations: hands to chest, and hands to stomach. This posture appears on both female and male figurines. Another posture, which seems to be exclusively female, closes the body by crossing the arms diagonally, one hand touching the shoulder, the other the opposite hip. Conventionally the

figurines are collectively described as adopting 'worship' or 'supplication' gestures (e.g. Rutkowski 1986:85, 87–8, 1991:52–6). As our study of the Atsipadhes figurines proceeded we found this way of thinking about the figurines increasingly restrictive. Our painstaking work to find joins between the broken fragments revealed a wider range of gestures, some not previously recorded. Specifically, the Atsipadhes figurines reveal that a series of more open postures should be added to the repertoire. These are: arms upraised and forward; arms in front of the body, at head height, embracing an empty circle; arms in front of the head and torso, one high, one low. As we discuss below, several of these gestures can be observed in ritual scenes portrayed in the other media of Minoan art.

A brief review of material from other peak sanctuary sites confirmed to us that these open gestures are present, but have not been recorded. This is because certain gestures, where the arms are held close to the body, have a high visibility precisely because they break less easily. Other open gestures, recognized in our material, are prone to breakage, and have therefore tended to be overlooked elsewhere.

Problematizing Minoan gesture

The increased range and the curious positions of some of the gestures raised new questions. Was the conventional way of thinking about them simply as 'worship' and 'supplication' gestures actually appropriate? Should we instead be exploring other possible models for the use of body posture and gesture as part of ritual behaviour?

The terminology of 'supplication/worship' presupposes a form of ritual action familiar from western religions. The focus is on the external shape of the gesture or posture – hands folded in prayer, head bowed in reverence, kneeling. Such actions may be conducive to creating a respectful and focused mood, but their primary purpose is supplication of the deity's mercy, and/or recognition and symbolic expression of the worshipper's moral need for that mercy (Lang 1997:424).

There are other models for ritual behaviour, which make more active use of the body as a vehicle for communicating with the transcendent, by moving into an *altered state of consciousness* (ASC). Other widely used terms are: ecstasy (Eliade's preferred but now unfashionable term), trance state, non-ordinary reality, shamanic state of consciousness, though it should be noted that the definition and use of each these terms is the subject of scholarly debate (Atkinson 1992:310–11). In addition, research into different embodied practices (e.g. shamanic, Buddhist, and Yogic) suggests that they can be 'phenomenologically mapped' as involving different levels of

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consciousness (Walsh 1989, 1990). From this perspective 'altered state of consciousness' (ASC) may be more usefully employed as a term referring to a *range* of related trance and meditational behaviours rather than as a reductionist frame of reference.

Ritual behaviours involving altered bodily states take a very diverse range of forms – from visionary experiences or journeys to possession trance by spirits – but they are widely attested in numerous societies, both past and present, and as spiritual experiences are welcomed and highly valued (Bourguignon 1973, 1979:233–69, Eliade 1964, Halifax 1982, Lang 1997: 361–418, Lewis 1989). While the model of 'classical shamanism' of the Siberian steppe may spring most readily to the reader's mind, altered states of consciousness are integral to ritual behaviours in a much wider range of contexts. The ASC may be the reserve of a privileged (priestly) few, operate as a 'rite of passage' for a particular age group, or be more communal in nature. It also has a place both in non-complex and in strongly hierarchical state societies, and while colonial powers and modern states (China; Korea) have been inclined to control and suppress shamanic practices (Atkinson 1992:314–7), there are also cases of elites, such as the Mayans, using such practices in their role as intermediaries with the supernatural world.

The content and the purpose of these embodied experiences is always filtered through cultural systems of knowledge and expectation, but they also have a recognizable and measurable neurophysiological basis in terms of bodily responses, including often dramatic changes in brain wave patterns and in the production of bio-chemical compounds (Goodman 1990:25–6, Harner 1990:51–2, Lex 1979, Walsh 1989, 1990). Each study must seek a balance between the common themes arising from the bodily universalities of ASC experiences and a contextualized understanding of the social and cultural dimensions. With this in mind we introduce two short comparative studies to illustrate the expressive possibilities of the Body in shaping ritual experiences, before presenting our ideas about such practices in a specifically Minoan context.

Ecstatic Body Postures

Much of the research on the means to achieve ASC has concentrated on the external factors of sound (drumming, rattling), or the action and setting of the ritual, or (most easily understood those who reached adulthood in late twentieth century western society!) the ingestion of psychotropic or hallucinogenic substances. The possible importance both of rhythmic sound and of psychotropic plants in Minoan ritual merit careful study, but what interested us in the context of this paper was ritual posture/gesture as an

embodiment of mystical experience, i.e. that the body itself is a vehicle into the ASC.

Among modern researchers on ASC, the one with the strongest focus on body postures has been Felicitas Goodman. Though her initial research was on *glossolalia* (speaking in tongues), Goodman observed that the trance experience was often initiated from deliberately restricted posture (Goodman 1986). She then collected many body postures portrayed in the art and sculpture of ancient cultures and modern traditional societies, and conducted an extensive series of experiments with volunteers to determine the ASC possibilities of each posture. The postures were combined with the use of the rattle, a traditional shamanic device for 'sonic driving', limiting or focussing the aural sensory input to the brain, thus stimulating it to shift into the ASC. Scientific experimentation on the interaction between sound and the ASC is still limited, but already it has been demonstrated that the repetitive sound of the rattle or drum becomes intrusive and focussing for the consciousness, and it causes spillover between the normally separate functions of the left and right lobes of the brain (Lex 1979). This has visionary effects in the ASC, trance state.

Goodman's experiments led her to identify categories of trance experience associated with specific postures; these include healing, divination, metamorphosis, spirit journey, and rites of passage (Goodman 1990). Though these all fall within the range of ASC experience as defined in other shamanic methods, the especial interest of Goodman's work is its emphasis on the body. Other shamanic research has tended either to underestimate the interaction of the body in initiating the ASC, or to define the entire experience through the effect of artificial and external stimuli, such as the use of drugs. Goodman's research proves that the body itself contains all the elements to make it an effective medium into the ASC, without the additional aid of artificial, chemical stimulus.

The Taoist body

It may be observed that in their choice of analytical models archaeologists tend to prefer either living cultures that are traditional (or to use a more loaded term "primitive") or sophisticated, complex cultures that are dead. In terms of understanding the body, this is particularly limiting, because it ignores the considerable, and still evolving, exploration of the body, mind, and systemic energetic abilities found in the yogic practices of India and China. Moreover these practices are decidedly holistic; for the western analyst they offer a real alternative to Cartesian hierarchical mind/body divisions. It should be acknowledged, of course, that archaeologists are not

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alone in not addressing the eastern body. Even though Mauss recognised the value of Chinese, primarily Taoist, and Indian practices for exploring the interaction of bodily techniques and mystical states as early as 1935 (Mauss 1979 [1935]:122), philosophers and social commentators of the body did not choose to follow up his insightful advice until relatively recently (Saso 1998).

Taoism does indeed offer a sophisticated approach to the body, combining quietistic philosophy with meditation and longevity practices (one of the bases of Chinese medicine), plus an elaborate ritual tradition including magic and divination (Robinet 1997). The common experience of the body that integrates all these aspects are sets of body postures and physical exercises called *ch'i-kung* (literally "breath-effort" with the more extended meaning of "energy-work") or more traditionally *daoyin*, meaning "drawing and pulling" (Frantzis 1993). Within the field of Chinese medicine, ongoing modern research has demonstrated that these body postures and exercises do indeed effect brain wave pattern, neurological function, blood flow, biochemical and endocrine secretions (see extensive references in Cohen 1997, Kaptchuk 1983, Miura 1989). It is clear that the more esoteric of these practices are intimately connected with Taoist theories of spiritual alchemy (Maspero 1981, Needham 1983), wherein visionary experience is prized as an intrinsic element of these alchemical processes (Robinet 1993). Moreover Schipper's accounts of the use of *daoyin* in modern Taoist rituals clearly includes trance and ASC experiences (Schipper 1993).

Descriptions of *daoyin* are to be found in the very earliest Taoist texts, dating back at least to the 4th century B.C. (Graham 1981, Roth 1996), thus making it one of the oldest strands of Taoism. More significantly it is the application of these bodily techniques to mystical experience that provides the link between Taoism and the activities and knowledge of the *wu*, the early Chinese shamans of the Bronze and Early Iron Ages (Despeux 1989, Schipper 1993, Paper 1995, Robinet 1997:36), whose practices demonstrate the interaction between divination, weather magic, and healing.

ASC and Minoan Ritual Scenes

The existence of ASC within Minoan religion, defined as an ecstatic dimension to Minoan ritual action, has long been widely accepted. In the complex imagery of gold seal-rings of the Second Palace period (c. 1700–1450 BC) Evans first identified a range of rituals whose purpose was to secure the presence or epiphany of the deity (*PM* III:67–73, 140). Further analysis of Minoan iconography has suggested that two distinct forms of epiphany are depicted: enacted and visionary (Hägg 1986). In enacted epiphany the role of the deity is performed or acted out by a human

representative, who interacts with processions of worshippers and receives offerings. Depictions of visionary epiphany differ both in the way the deity is represented, and in the accompanying ritual actions. The deity may appear as a small descending anthropomorphic figure, or the depiction may include a bird, butterfly or other floating images such as a butterfly or eye, which have been interpreted as *symbolizing* the arrival of the deity (Warren 1988: 18, Marinatos 1993:283, n. 24).

The ritual actions performed in this context include pulling at a tree, and hugging or embracing a boulder or stone (Warren 1990), and an activity, usually described as dancing, in which the arms are shown in range of different postures and the curve of the body is suggestive of movement or swaying. Through these actions the presence of the deity is envisioned or felt by the participants; in other words, the body is the conduit to experiencing the divine. An important and distinctive feature of this group of images is the curiously attenuated (aniconic) form of the human heads, which contrasts powerfully with the supple, rounded body forms and indeed the elaborately flounced skirts of the participants. Writers on Minoan religion have noted that this may have 'a religious significance'. If we think of these images not as simply symbolic but as representing distinctive elements of the trance experience, then the aniconic head could be read much more specifically as an artistic device for representing the shift of 'self', of both mind and body, into the altered state of consciousness. Supporting this interpretation is the commonly reported experience of trance participants, where the head feels as though it dissolves, explodes, or somehow disappears. This may have some basis in the physiological factors of the trance state. Furthermore, artists from a wide range of cultures have used similar conventions of distorted and transforming heads to communicate the trance experience to the viewer. (Halifax 1982:80, 90-1, Whitley 1992:101, fig. 10).

The images on the gold seal-rings thus strongly support the inclusion of altered states of consciousness within the ritual framework of the Minoans (more fully discussed in Morris and Peatfield, forthcoming). It is important, however, to acknowledge the social context of these images; they are the products and preserve of the Second Palace period palatial elite, who are depicting and locating themselves in relation to the divine. It is also worth stressing that the interactive elements that define and frame these ecstatic activities belong to the natural world: rocks, trees, flowers, birds and butterflies.

Let us now return to the natural world and our point of origin: the peak sanctuaries, collectively a key element in the Minoan ritual landscape. We have briefly presented the evidence for the spatial layout of activities on the Atsipadhes Korakias peak sanctuary, as manifested in the deposition of the

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votive material. We suggest that the anthropomorphic figurines too can yield a further interpretative layer: that is, they may embody a visual description of ritual action and experience, which is rooted *not* simply in externalized gesture – ‘I salute’, ‘I supplicate the deity’ – but in a deeper use of the body as an active constituent in ritual behaviour, as already observed on the gold rings. The established view of the figurines, as adopting ‘worship’ gestures or ‘attitudes of respect’, unconsciously accepts a western model of rather passive ritual behaviour, and does not directly address the range and distinctiveness of the gestures.

Fasting, sensory deprivation, repetitive rhythmic movement and sound, and hallucinogens are among the better known techniques used to induce altered states (Bourguignon 1979, Furst 1972, Harner 1973). Equally effective are body postures which can be used to stimulate specific physiological changes in the body, especially when combined with rhythmic sounds such as rattling or drumming. Given a proper ritual framework, that is when combined with a common worldview or set of beliefs and expectations, the bodily changes activate the ASC or ecstatic experience. The experience takes its content and interpretation from the cultural context. Thus the recognition of an underlying neurophysiological dimension to the trance experience is not a reductionist explanation of ecstatic behaviour, since individuals and communities select and process the products of their nervous systems and interpret their experiences in terms of their specific cultural setting.

Just as the means of achieving ecstatic states are varied, so too are the contents and the purposes of the experiences. The images on the later Minoan gold-rings support the suggestion that the contents of the experience may have included visionary epiphany. It is likely that the mystical experience, crossing into the domain of the transcendent, was highly valued for its own sake. Elsewhere ecstatic states have facilitated spirit journeys, initiation rituals (often involving spiritual rebirth), revelation of hidden knowledge through oracles or divination, and healing. Though we should not, and indeed do not exclude these other purposes, it is healing which seems to offer the closest fit for the application of the shamanic model to the evidence of the peak sanctuaries. The familiar votive limbs have demonstrated the clear link between peak sanctuaries and healing rituals since their discovery. Shamanic experience guided through the physical postures portrayed by the clay figurines, may fill the gap between simple offering and the efficacy of the ritual process.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we offer the suggestion that the anthropomorphic figurines deposited on Minoan peak sanctuaries may portray ecstatic body postures rather than gestures of supplication. The gold-rings from the Second Palace period offer a specifically Minoan framework of ecstatic ritual behaviours, although such rituals may also by this time have been appropriated for the exclusive use of the palace elite. According to this narrative the figurines would then represent an earlier phase of wider and direct access to the transcendent, in the context of peak sanctuary cult. Our re-interpretation of the figurines arose initially from trying to provide a model which could explain the need for a range of very distinct ritual postures within Minoan culture. Beyond that it also invites us to move away from the limitations of existing interpretations; these have as their unspoken analogy western modes of ritual expression which focus on petitionary and intercessionary prayer at the expense of embodied practices with the capacity to direct and shape religious experience. This approach places Minoan religion in a wider context of ritual behaviours which recognise and value the importance of the feeling body as a driving force in ritual actions and experiences.

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